WAY STATIONS

Lee Mingwei

May 1–July 19, 1998

CONTEMPORARY SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Art/Interaction

AT THE CORE OF LEE MINGWEI'S ART LIES A SERIES OF INTERACT NS THE ARTIST, THE PARTICIPANT, AND THE SPECTATOR. ALTHOUGH S AGE THE PUBLIC SPACE OF A MUSEUM, THESE EXCHANGES AND THEIR EF CT NOT BE IMMEDIATELY APPARENT.

The Dining Project, for example, begins with an encounter that takes place in this gallery after the Museum has closed to the public. Several times a week, Lee carefully prepares an Asian meal in the staff kitchen and shares it with a different guest. Food serves as a catalyst for acquaintance and conversation. The ongoing dialogue of the two diners is recorded as they sit across from one another at a low table. The following day, the audio recording is played in the gallery, slightly altered and barely audible. This aural trace allows us to experience the meal, secondhand, while maintaining the guest's anonymity.

The Letter-Writing Project takes place when the Museum is open. Inside freestanding booths, we find a supply of stationery and a private space conducive to reflection and contemplation. Lee invites us to write letters to people both living and dead, "the letters we have always intended to write but have put off with excuses." He asks that we reflect on three things: gratitude, an event for which we feel grateful; insight, an event that has led to an important realization; and forgiveness, an event for which we would ask or offer forgiveness. Gratitude, insight, and forgiveness correspond respectively to three positions of meditation in Ch'an Buddhism: standing, sitting, and kneeling. While one booth offers a seated position, and the other a kneeling position, we are free to write letters of any kind in either one. Letters and addressed envelopes can be clipped inside the booth for others to read, or they can first be inserted in an envelope and sealed. The shadowy silhouette of the writer surrounded by letters will be visible through the translucent glass panels of the booths. Addressed letters are collected and mailed weekly, while those to the deceased are burned by the artist.

By aestheticizing familiar rituals, *The Dining Project* and *The Letter-Writing Project* heighten our awareness of the potential for change that underlies the activities of our everyday lives.

Inspired by Buddhist ritual and language, Lee regards *The Dining Project* and *The Letter-Writing Project* as "way stations," places of rest and renewal along the path traveled by us all.

BORN IN 1964, LEE GE W TAIPEI. AS A CHILD E S THE KITCHEN, SAMPL G THEIR FORMAL PRESEN AT

View of *The Dining Project*, 1997
Wood, audiotape players, beans, rice, and tatami mats, 24 x 132 x 132 in. (61 x 33
Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York

Money for Art, 1997 (detail)
Wood shelving, origami sculptures from U.S. currency, traded objects,
59 x 58 x 5 in. (149.9 x 147.3 x 12.7 cm) each shelving unit
Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York

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W UP IN THE TOWN OF TAICHUNG NEAR
SPENT MUCH OF HIS FREE TIME AT HOME IN
DISHES PREPARED BY THE CHEF PRIOR TO
ATION AT A FAMILY MEAL.

At the age of eight, he began to practice Ch'an Buddhism by spending summers at a monastery, where he lived with his master, tended the grounds, and learned through daily activities. Lee attended high school in northern California at a boarding school run by Benedictine monks. Following graduation, he studied at several colleges on the West Coast, receiving a BFA from California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) with honors in textile design. There, his course of study included a class on critical issues in sculpture with Mark Thompson, an artist and breeder of bees. Lee admired Thompson's approach to artmaking, an approach similar to that of Ch'an Buddhism in making no distinction between art and life. He recalls helping Thompson install a piece for an exhibition that included a functioning beehive set in the rib cage of an ox skeleton. The bees were sealed in a chamber that had a tube opening onto a field of flowers; they flew out to pollinate by day and returned to the hive at night throughout the duration of the exhibition. The temporal aspect of the piece appealed to Lee, as did the model of Thompson, an artist who worked with natural cycles and social systems.

Lee's earliest interactive pieces, produced shortly after he left CCAC, took the form of photographs. *Money for Art* (1994) documents the fate of nine small sculptures, serpentine forms he made by folding ten-dollar bills. Lee made the sculptures at a café, where his activity attracted responses from passersby. In exchange for receiving a sculpture, some of these individuals agreed to stay in touch with the artist for a year. Those who received sculptures included Tony, programmer; Kan, student; Sophia, housewife; John, homeless; and Jennifer, waitress. After six months, two of the participants had transformed the art into money. Lee photographed the purchases made with the ten-dollar bills. At the end of the year, five sculptures remained, one had been stolen, and three had been exchanged for goods.

In a different vein, *100 Days with Lily* (1995) documents Lee's relationship with a flower he planted as a bulb, nurtured to maturity, and carried everywhere, even after the flower died. Text overlaid onto five photographs that show various stages of Lily's life chronicles moments of their shared daily activities: day 1, 10:23, planting Lily; day 2, 06:34, sleeping with Lily; day 3, 12:05, eating with Lily; day 4, 09:14, walking with Lily; day 5, 07:12, meditating with Lily. Lily died on day 79 and was exhumed on day 100. The reverence for natural cycles and everyday life is similar in spirit to Thompson's piece involving bees.

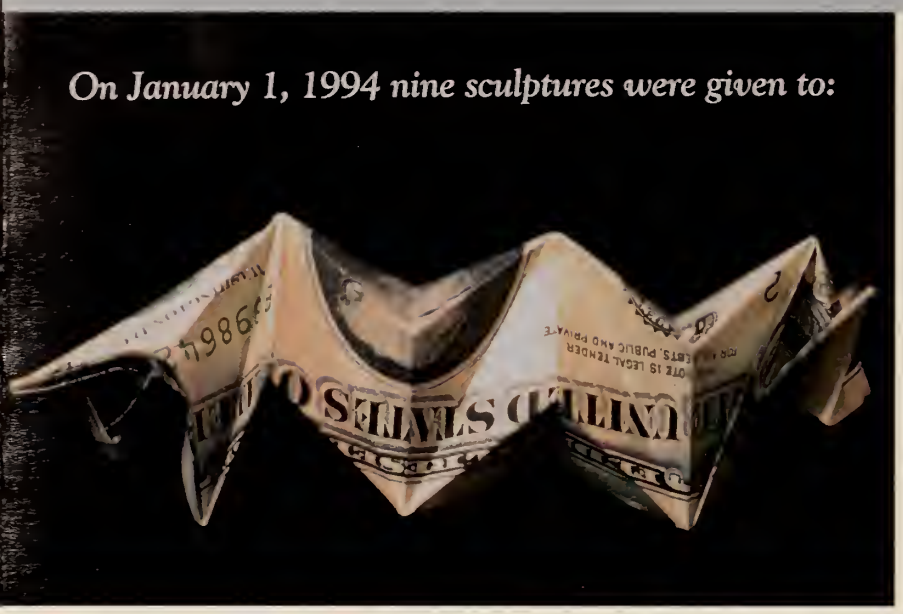
At Yale University, where Lee enrolled for graduate studies, his interactive pieces took on architectural dimensions. For his thesis show, he created *Reflections* (1997), a freestanding chamber of muslin, divided into compartments by a floor-to-ceiling two-way mirror set in the middle. Two participants completed the work. As they sat on either side of the mirror, each saw his or her reflection gradually merge with the face of the other person. The silhouettes of the participants could be seen by visitors through the translucent muslin walls.

The Dining Project originated during Lee's first year at Yale. He set up a rudimentary platform in his studio, where he dined, one-on-one, with over thirty

335.3 cm)

Money for Art #2, #3, #5, 1994
Silver dye bleach prints (Ilfochrome), 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm) each
Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York

100 Days with Lily #1 – #5, 1995
Silver dye bleach prints (Ilfochrom
Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York



individuals who responded to a flyer he had posted around campus. The flyer sought "participants for project dealing with journal-keeping and self-disclosure. Participants must enjoy introspection, self-disclosing conversation, writing, and the sharing of food." Lee initially asked each respondent to keep a diary of thoughts about the dinner, but later found that this part of the project was not entirely successful.

Last year, as part of the one-artist exhibition "InteractExchange," *The Dining Project* was restaged at Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, where Lee cooked and served dinner after the gallery had closed for the day. For the occasion, he designed and constructed the current dining platform, a simple and elegant structure more finished than the improvised setup in his studio at Yale. In addition, he decided to tape the dinners so that conversations could be played back the following day. At this time, Lee revised *Money for Art*, giving it sculptural form: he made origami sculptures from dollar bills and placed them on the shelves of modular wall units. Visitors to the gallery could take one of the origami pieces in exchange for a personal effect and a card stating the person's name and profession. For example, the artist Byron Kim left a small piece of hardware, stating his profession as "handyman." Since galleries are places where money is regularly exchanged for art, this piece had a particular resonance. As with the first photographic version, we are asked to consider what constitutes art — the sculpture, the everyday object(s) left in exchange for the sculpture, or the act of exchange itself.

The Dining Project and *The Letter-Writing Project* look back to process-oriented art of the early 1970s when real-life situations and social institutions and systems — including meals and dining and the postal system — became the raw material for art. One of the best-known examples of dining as an art form is the cooperative restaurant Food, spawned in 1971 on the corner of Green and Prince Streets in New York City, by Gordon Matta-Clark, Carol Goodden, Suzanne Harris, and others. An architectural space altered by Matta-Clark's bold cuttings through the building, Food was also an inex-

:0 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm) each

pensive place for artists to eat, a community watering hole, and a source of jobs for artists. It was a restaurant, performance space, and work of art in one.

The postal service was another system employed by many artists in the 1970s. One of the best-known proponents of mail art was Ray Johnson. An exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1970 entitled "The New York Correspondence School of Art" was composed of ephemera mailed to the Museum by Johnson's correspondents. In the same year, Vito Acconci took part in an exhibition entitled "Information" at The Museum of Modern Art. His piece consisted of having his mail forwarded to the museum, where he would go to pick it up.

For Lee, however, the focus is less about the networks themselves and the communities of artists that form as a result of them, than about one-on-one exchange. His *Dining Project* is sometimes compared to the food performances of Thai-born artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, who began making food art in 1990, when he served pad thai at the opening of his first one-artist exhibition in New York. For the duration of the show, he arranged and rearranged the pungent remains from the event in the gallery. Two years later, for another show, Tiravanija set up a kitchen in the back room of a gallery, where business dealings usually transpire. He cooked Thai curries that were served continuously to visitors. The remaining plates, bottles, chopsticks, and plastic cutlery composed an ever-growing installation. Although Lee studied with Taravanija at Yale, the intimacy of his one-on-one dinners, which are inaccessible to gallery visitors, is quite distinct from Tiravanija's feeding of the masses during gallery hours. In some cases Tiravanija had left by the time gallery-goers came to eat. Dining with Lee is a more personal experience that necessitates a degree of mutual trust on the part of host and guest. In a similar fashion, *The Letter-Writing Project* asks participants to reveal something about themselves. An exchange takes place among the writer, the recipient, and visitors, who are given the opportunity to read some of the letters prior to their mailing.

The Dining Project and *The Letter-Writing Project* are part of a tradition of Buddhist-inspired American art that came into its own during the Beat generation and includes a range of artists as diverse as Morris Graves, John Cage, Ad Reinhardt, and Bill Viola. While the influence of Buddhist thought takes different forms in the work of these artists, in Lee's art it is most visible in the emphasis on process, on becoming. Beautifully designed and crafted structures — the dining platform or the writing booths — play a role, not as commodities but as props supporting the activities themselves.

Museums have long been regarded as places where the contemplation of beautiful paintings or sublime sculptures can lead to a transcendent experience. In this sense, modern museums have been likened to cathedrals devoted to the new religion of art. It is appropriate then that Lee's art, with its strong spiritual component, should be presented in a museum context. Its path to transcendence comes not from the contemplation of objects, but from the consideration of everyday interactions. Learning from *The Dining Project* and *The Letter-Writing Project* will enable us to find "way stations" in the humblest activities of our own daily lives.

Eugenie Tsai
Associate Curator

View of *The Dining Project*, 1997

Acknowledgments

A few years ago, I could never have imagined doing what I do today, and I know that had it not been for the help of many people I would not be here. They are the links in the chain of my development, and without any one of them that chain would not bind my present to my past. I thank them all, those who taught me through their words, their acts, and their presence: my family, Gregg Richardson, Andrew Siedlikowski, Mark Thompson, Lia Cook, John Newman, Ronald Jones, Rachael Berwick, Meyer Vaisman, Roni Horn, Gary Simmons, Donald Moffat, Thelma Golden, Michael Smith, Eileen Myles, and Kristin Jones. Thanks also to Lea Freid and Jane Lombard, who presented my first one-artist show in their gallery. I still marvel at their daring decision to show my work, which in turn introduced me to David Ross and Eugenie Tsai, who took another daring leap in bringing my work to the Whitney. I can only conclude that they must have been very impressed with my culinary skills to allow me to cook for eleven weeks in their museum.

I often remark how ironic it is that, although I graduated from a sculpture program, I really do not know how to construct anything. It is the skills and talents of people like Charly Wittock, Stephan Freid, Eric Sparks, and Jim Conti that have allowed me to realize the physical dimension of my projects, without which my work would be entirely conceptual!

I also want to thank those whom I met in Taipei this past March — Chao-yi Tsai, Yung-fen Hu, Pamela Huang, Tina Keng, Tim Lin, and Sophie Chang — without them I would not have received the help of Pierre Chen in securing funding from the Yageo Corporation. Finally, thanks to Web Master Virgil Wong, who has only begun to teach me the wonders of that new mode of communication, the World Wide Web.

LEE MINGWEI

Lee Mingwei

BORN IN TAIWAN, 1964
CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF ARTS & CRAFTS, OAKLAND (BFA, 1993)
YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN (MFA, 1997)
LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK

ONE-ARTIST EXHIBITIONS

1993 ISABEL PERCY WEST GALLERY, CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF ARTS & CRAFTS, OAKLAND
1997 "INTERACTEXCHANGE," LOMBARD-FREID FINE ARTS, NEW YORK

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1989 AT BROADWAY & TENTH STREETS, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA
1997 "MFA EXHIBITIONS," YALE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF ART, ART AND ARCHITECTURE GALLERY
"WORLD VIEWS," DEUTSCHE BANK, NEW YORK

Works in the Exhibition

HEIGHT PRECEDES WIDTH PRECEDES DEPTH.

PLATFORM FROM *THE DINING PROJECT*, 1997
WOOD, AUDIOTAPE PLAYERS, BEANS, RICE, AND TATAMI MATS,
24 x 132 x 132 IN. (61 x 335.3 x 335.3 CM)
LOMBARD-FREID FINE ARTS, NEW YORK
CONSULTANTS:
CHARLY WITTOCK, ARCHITECT
ERIC R. SPARKS, FABRICATOR

BOOTHS FROM *THE LETTER-WRITING PROJECT*, 1998
WOOD AND GLASS, 114 x 67 x 91 IN. (289.6 x 170.2 x 231.1 CM)
LOMBARD-FREID FINE ARTS, NEW YORK
PAPER COURTESY OF KATE'S PAPERIE
CONSULTANTS:
STEPHAN FREID, ARCHITECT
JIM CONTI, LIGHTING DESIGNER
ERIC R. SPARKS, FABRICATOR

Photograph credits: ©Photo Cristian Alexa, *Money for Art* (detail); Charly Wittock, View of *The Dining Project*

Versions of *The Dining Project* and *The Letter-Writing Project* are also available on-line at http://www.paperveins.org/mingwei.

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